

## Big Island's tourist boom

New Japanese airport brings more visitors to the island

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Three hundred-sixty Japanese tourists chartered a plane to Kona Thursday, one day after Japan's third major international airport opened in the Toyota Motor capital.

The 747 plane came from Chubu International Airport, also known as Centrair. The newly opened facility is dubbed the "Toyota airport" and its opening is reportedly aimed at better connecting Japan's industrial heartland to the international market.

Big Island Visitors Bureau Executive Director George Applegate sees Thursday's chartered flight from Centrair as a "gateway" to a regular flight being offered between that airport and the Kona International Airport.

"It's a brand new airport, and guess what, there's a charter flight the next day to Kona," Applegate said.

The airport is partly owned by the private sector and is led by Toyota Motor whose central offices are in Nagoya in the same Aichi prefecture where the airport lies on an artificial island off Tokoname.

Centrair opened a month ahead of the World Expo to be held there and is said to be an international high-tech showcase with a display of a Formula One car among other autos, an amusement park, two hotels, around 100 restaurants and a public bath.

Yukihisa Hirano, president of Central Japan International Airport Co., told Japanese reporters this week that the company plans to increase the number of international flights to 314 a week by the end of April, including flights to Chicago, San Francisco and Vancouver.

There were 25 flights, mainly to Asian countries such as China and South Korea, out of Centrair when the airport opened this week, according to the Daily Yomiuri.

In efforts to make Kona an attractive regular destination from Centrair, tourism officials and vendors greeted the Japanese tourists when they debarked from the charter plane shortly after 8:30 a.m.

The 360 Japanese tourists were greeted with leis, bottled water, Kona coffee, Big Island candies and a hula performance from the Na Lei O Ka Holo Ku halau, led by kumu hula Nani Lim Yap.

Applegate said the regular flight from Narita -- Japan's other international airport aside from Kansai near Osaka -- landed 10 minutes after the chartered flight, so Japanese tourists on that regular flight also received a formal greeting from tourism officials and vendors.

"There was a feeling of real aloha in the air," Applegate said. "As the world becomes a harder, scarier place, with the aloha spirit, this is a kind, good place. We're promoting the aloha spirit, our lifestyle, the goodness of the people, not sand, sun and surf. We're working with the County of Hawaii and the Hawaii Tourism Authority, trying to keep the aloha spirit (in marketing Hawaii as a destination)."

Saying island tourism officials are "trying to get more direct flights to Kona from everywhere," Applegate said their efforts are paying off.

More direct flights from Japan have been arriving at Kona International Airport, he said.

State Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism statistics state an 18 percent increase in the number of airline seats to Kona from Japan between 2003 and 2004.

The number of airline seats on Japanese flights to Kona increased from 95,360 in 2003 to 113,264, according to statistics provided by Christopher Kam of the Hawaii Visitors and Convention Bureau.

The number of Japanese tourists coming to the Big Island -- whether they flew directly to Kona or interisland via Honolulu or another island -- grew by 12.1 percent between 2003 and 2004, according to Ross Wilson, president of Current Events, the public relations agency for the Big Island Visitors Bureau.

The number of Japanese tourists to the Big Island increased from 192,809 in 2003 to 216,153 in 2004, Wilson said, referring to statistics provided by the Office of State Tourism.

He said 36,000 of those 216,513 Japanese tourists last year opted to stay only on the Big Island.

Overall, the total number of tourists to the Big Island rose 5.9 percent to 1,278,713 in 2004, with the number of visitors from the west coast increasing 5.2 percent to 500,000 and those from the east coast increasing 5.6 percent to 400,000, according to statistics provided by Wilson.

Applegate said on April 3 there will be a kick-off for North American Airlines' direct flights on Sundays to Kona from Oakland, returning through Maui. "Usually it's the other way around," he said.

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